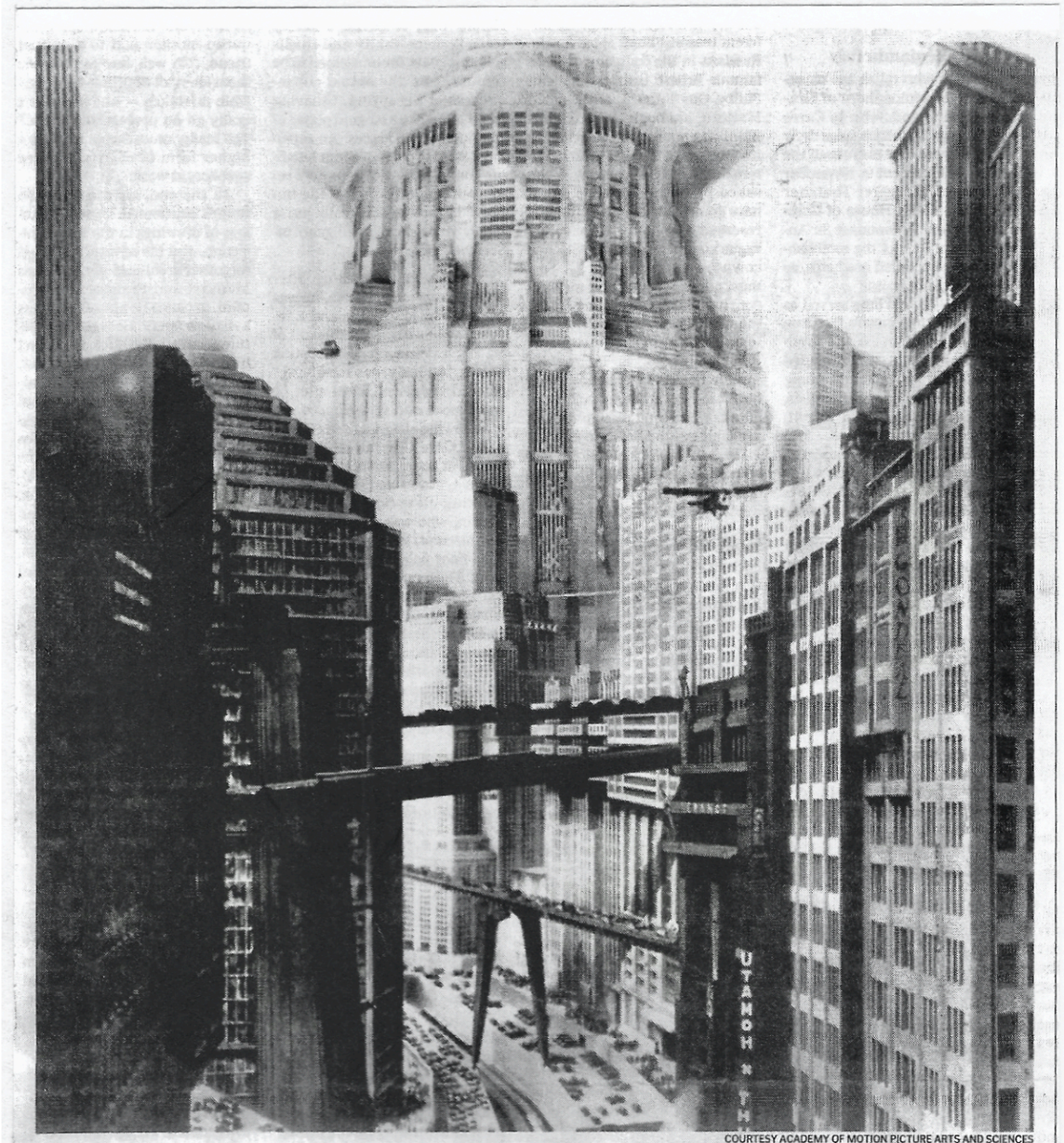

COURTESY ACADEMY OF MOTION PICTURE ARTS AND SCIENCES

Fritz Lang's "Metropolis," inspired by New York, showed Americans the cinematic possibilities of their own greatest city.

Manhattan transfer

In re-creating New York on the big screen, filmmakers and writers have transformed it into a transcendent city of myth

Celluloid Skyline: New York and the Movies
By James Sanders
Knopf, 496 pp., illustrated, $45

By Michael Joseph Gross

Why are skyscrapers amazing? In "Celluloid Skyline," James Sanders first looks to "The Wizard of Oz" for the answer to that question, suggesting that when Dorothy and her friends lay eyes on the Emerald City's skyline, "they see the fulfillment of their dreams." Sanders contends that the movies have made New York into America's Emerald City. If King Kong can climb the Empire State Building, if Superman can sail with Lois Lane through the canyons of the avenues, then anything is possible here. Sanders explains, expansively: "King Kong revealed the essential impulse motivating the skyscraper city: to strive upward and, by dint of superhuman effort, touch the sky." "Celluloid Skyline," by charting the evolution of New York's image in the movies, also makes a significant contribution to a larger cultural project that seems particularly urgent right now — defining the relationship between America's realities and its dreams.

Sanders (a Manhattan architect who, with Ric Burns, wrote the PBS series "New York: A Documentary History" and its companion book) clearly loves both New York and the movies. He believes that the link between them is fundamental: "Like New York, film is big. Like New York, film is larger than life. And like New York, it embodies — even defines — qualities of romance, glamour, danger, adventure." Sanders also believes that film has heightened these qualities of the city, "transformed New York . . . [into] an elemental force, transcending any earthly place: a super city, a mythic city, a dream city."

The American film industry began in New York, for both practical and aesthetic reasons. Heavy cameras (Biographs weighed 500 pounds) and slow film stock (which registered images best in direct sunlight) forced early filmmakers to focus their attention on outdoor scenes accessible by horse-drawn wagon. The quality of New York's paved streets thus helped make the city's bustling street scenes prime subjects for the first American short films, called "actualities." Beginning in 1896, cameramen created documentary-like, point-and-crank views of every aspect of the city's life, from the exotic (Edison made one at Coney Island called "Electrocuting an Elephant") to the mundane ("Sorting Refuse at Incinerating Plant, New York City").

Until the demise of New York's film industry in the late 1920s and early '30s, most movie depictions of the city continued to follow the actualities' precedent of realism. The rise of talking pictures, however, drove film production west to California, where more imaginative depictions of the city took shape. (Talkies required the use of sound equipment too sensitive to work in New York's all-pervading noise, and the industry's scale of production had grown beyond the limits of the city's soundstage space.) On the bigger, quieter studios of Hollywood, the mythic place that Sanders calls "movie New York" came into being.

For talking pictures, Hollywood needed scripts, and for scripts it needed writers. The call went out to New York, and by the mid-1930s, Sanders notes, "the big round table at the Algonquin's Rose Room was empty." Most Manhattan emigres didn't care much for Hollywood: They resented the city's feeble night life and were disoriented by its geographic diffusion. Hollywood didn't care much for them, either: "schmucks with Underwoods," Harry Warner snorted. Out of their frustration emerged the New York of "Swing Time," "King Kong," and "42nd Street." This New York was a fantasy of glamour, sophistication, excitement, and danger, "a place sprung from the minds of homesick writers."

Sanders suggests that the real New York appears onscreen as a city transformed by its dream self.

Describing movie New York as the magnificent dream of a bunch of displaced people, Sanders establishes the central concern of "Celluloid Skylines": geography's influence on one's sense of possibility. Most of the book is organized as a virtual tour of the places that compose movie New York: skyscrapers, tenements, mansions, lofts, train stations, Broadway. Summaries and analyses of individual films consider how characters shape and are shaped by the places they inhabit. (Gangster movies depicted tenements as "the breeding ground of crime"; loft apartments, in films such as "Tootsie" and "Fatal Attraction," signal a character's distance from the mainstream.)

Like most tour guides, Sanders occasionally overheats his language with hyperbole (did Hollywood's back lots really play host to "probably the greatest collection of diverse skills and crafts ever assembled in a single place"?). For the most part, his enthusiasm is well calibrated, with nicely timed, wow-inducing excursuses throughout, on art history, politics, architecture, or the technical details of film production. And hundreds of photographs — beautifully reproduced, many of them previously unpublished — are often rivaled for interest by their corking captions. (One of the best, about the miniature skyline backdrop for Alfred Hitchcock's "Rope," describes the set's dozens of buildings lighted by 8,000 incandescent lights and 200 neon signs, shining under spun-glass clouds.)

Major film production began shifting back to New York in the early 1950s with movies such as "On the Waterfront" and "Marty." Improved sound equipment, lighter cameras, and film stock sensitive enough to allow for shooting at night made location work easier for directors at a time when cinematic realism both here and in Europe was becoming the fashion.

Because it took about four days to send dailies to Hollywood and back, the balance of power in the creative process shifted from studio heads to directors. So in subsequent decades, new generations of filmmakers — John Cassavetes, Martin Scorsese, Woody Allen, Spike Lee — were freed to explore the city's neighborhoods with, as Sanders puts it, "almost anthropological precision and care." They showed these places as "not merely background settings, but powerful sources of narrative tension and conflict." At the conclusion of "Celluloid Skyline" 's tour, Sanders suggests that, in films by the aforementioned directors, the real New York has learned to dance with Hollywood's mythic version; it appears onscreen as a city transformed by its dream self.

At the book's end, however, I couldn't shake

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Michael Joseph Gross is a writer in Provincetown.